Multiculturalism is taught in academia, debated in government, promoted by ethnic leaders, reported by the media, and discussed among the citizenry. Few are indifferent to a subject with so many proponents and opponents. Some see multiculturalism as the bedrock upon which to build a society of true equality, whereas others see multiculturalism as a sinkhole that will swallow up the very foundation of U.S. society.

At its very core, the multiculturalism debate is a polarization of the centuries-old dual American realities of pluralism and assimilation into competing forces for dominance. As this book has shown, pluralism has been a constant reality in the United States since colonial times, and
assimilation has been a steady, powerful force as well. There have always been both assimilationist and pluralist advocates, as well as both nativist alarmists and minority separatists.

Resentment and hostility about multiculturalism result from several factors. Rapid communication and televised images have heightened public consciousness of the diversity within U.S. society, but without placing it in the continuity of the larger historical context. Government policies and programs, particularly those dealing with bilingualism, become controversial when viewed as more than transitional aids by both pluralists and assimilationists. Vocal advocates for each position arouse strong feelings in their listeners in suggesting an “either-or” stance of supposedly diametrically opposing forces.

What raise reactions toward multiculturalism to a firestorm level are still other factors. First are the radical positions either anti-immigrant or racist, or else anti-White male or nonintegrationist. Another is revisionist history or literary anthologies that downplay “DWMs” (dead White males) or else Western civilization, and heavily emphasize women, people of color, and non-Western civilization. Add furor about political correctness—whether in the guise of speech or behavior codes, curricula offerings, or selective emphases. The result is controversy of a (dare I say it?) white-heat intensity.

Multiculturalism is a stance taken by pluralists. Does that mean it imperils the process of assimilation? The answer is, basically, no, but the explanation is a complicated one. Multiculturalism, as mentioned in the first chapter, is a newer term for cultural pluralism, not a new phenomenon. Large foreign-speaking communities, foreign-language schools, organizations, and houses of worship, even pluralist extremists, are not new to U.S. society. Is, then, the new version not to be feared any more than its precursor, or is this more than a “new suit”? Is this thing we call multiculturalism a clear and present danger? Before we can address this concern, we need to understand exactly what multiculturalism is.

The Umbrellas of Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism does not mean the same thing to everyone. Even the multiculturalists do not agree with one another as to what they are advocating. Before we can address the advantages or disadvantages of a multicultural society, therefore, we need to understand these differing viewpoints.
The Inclusionists

During the 1970s, multiculturalism meant the inclusion of material in the school curriculum that related the contributions of non-European peoples to the nation’s history. In the next phase, multiculturalists aimed to change all areas of the curriculum in schools and colleges to reflect the diversity of U.S. society and to develop in individuals an awareness and appreciation for the impact of non-European civilizations on American culture.3

Inclusionists would appear to be assimilationists, but they are more than this. Assimilationists seek elimination of cultural differences through loss of one’s distinctive traits that are replaced by the language, values, and other attributes of mainstream Americans. Although inclusionists share assimilationists’ desire for national unity through a common identity, they also promote a pluralist or multiculturalist perspective. This finds expression by recognition of diversity throughout U.S. history and of minority contributions to American art, literature, music, cuisine, scientific achievements, sports, and holiday celebrations.

In the 1990s, this viewpoint perhaps found its most eloquent voice in Diane Ravitch.4 She, too, emphasized a common culture but one that incorporated the contributions of all racial and ethnic groups so that they can believe in their full membership in America’s past, present, and future. She envisioned elimination of allegiance to any specific racial and/or ethnic group, with emphasis instead on our common humanity, our shared national identity, and our individual accomplishments.

Inclusionist multiculturalists thus approach pluralism not as if it were groups each standing under their own different-colored umbrellas, but of all sharing one multicolored umbrella whose strength and character reflect the diverse backgrounds but singular cause of those standing under it together.

The Separatists

The group of multiculturalists that generates the most controversy is people who advocate “minority nationalism” and “separate pluralism.” They reject an integrative approach and the notion of forming a common bond of identity among both the distinct minority groups and mainstream Americans. Instead of a collective American national identity, they seek specific, separate group identities that will withstand the assimilation process. This form of multiculturalism is the most extreme version of pluralism.
To achieve their objective and create a positive group identity, these multiculturalists seek to teach and maintain their own cultural customs, history, values, and festivals, while refusing to acknowledge those of the dominant culture. For example, some Native Americans raise strong objections to Columbus Day parades, while Afrocentrists downgrade Western civilization by arguing that it is merely a derivative of Afro-Egyptian culture—a claim, by the way, that is not historically accurate.5

Separatist multiculturalists do not want to stand with others under one multicolored umbrella. Not only do they wish to be under their own special umbrella, but they also want to share it only with their own kind and let them know why it is such a special umbrella. One may walk the same ground in the same storm, but shelter is to be found under a group’s personal umbrella.

What particularly infuriates the assimilationists about the separatists’ position is their concern that such emphasis on group identity promotes what Arthur Schlesinger calls “the cult of ethnicity.” In The Disuniting of America (1991), a book widely discussed in both Europe and North America, Schlesinger warned that the Balkan present may be America’s prologue.6

It is precisely that devastating warfare in the Balkans between Bosnians, Croatians, and Serbs in the former Yugoslavia that prompted so many voices in Canada, Europe, and the United States against multiculturalists who espouse separate pluralism. The “balkanization of society” is the most common expression that critics of multiculturalism use to suggest the threat to the social fabric supplied by a divisive policy promoting group identity over individual or societal welfare.

When Hispanic leaders from groups such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) insist on “language rights”—the maintenance of the Spanish language and Latino culture at public expense—the assimilationists warn of an emerging “Tower of Babel” society.7 When Afrocentrists such as Molefi Asante and Leon Jeffries emphasize the customs of African cultures over those of the dominant culture, their stress on African ethnicity provokes disapproval from critics such as Schlesinger, who complain that they drive “even deeper the awful wedges between races” by exaggerating ethnic differences.

The Integrative Pluralists

In 1915, Horace Kallen used the metaphor of a symphony orchestra to portray the strength through diversity of U.S. society.8 Just as different
groups of instruments each play their separate parts of the musical score but together produce beautiful music of blends and contrasts, so, too, he said, do the various populations within pluralist America. Kallen’s idea of effective functional integration but limited cultural integration, however, was essentially a Eurocentric vision and reality. People of color were mentioned only incidentally and were typically not allowed to sit with, let alone join, the orchestra.

Harry Triandis not only added an interracial component to this view of integrative pluralism in 1976, but he also suggested that the majority culture is enriched by “additive multiculturalism.” By this he meant that one can get more out of life by understanding other languages, cultural values, and social settings. He hoped for society becoming more cohesive by finding common superordinate goals without insisting upon a loss of Black identity, Native American identity, Asian identity, or Hispanic identity. Arguing that mainstream Americans, secure in their identity, need to develop new interpersonal skills, Triandis maintained that the essence of pluralism is the development of appreciation, interdependence, and skills to interact intimately with persons from other cultures. He added,

The majority culture can be enriched by considering the viewpoints of the several minority cultures that exist in America rather than trying to force these minorities to adopt a monocultural, impoverished, provincial viewpoint which may in the long run reduce creativity and the chances of effective adjustment in a fast-changing world. (p. 181)

This argument of cultural enrichment from diverse subcultures found another form of expression in Beyond the Culture Wars (1992) by Gerald Graff. He suggested that exposure to differing cultural views will revitalize education by creating the dynamics of dialogue and debate. As Socrates once encouraged his students to search for truth through intellectual clashes, so, too, Graff maintained, can multicultural education help students overcome relativism and become informed about different positions.

Ronald Takaki echoed Graff’s idea by recommending that the university become the meeting ground for different viewpoints. American minds, he believes, need to be opened to greater cultural diversity. U.S. history, like the country itself, does not belong to one group, says Takaki, and so a change in the status quo is needed. Instead of a hierarchy of power headed by a privileged group, greater cross-cultural understanding and interconnected viewpoints are necessary.
Integrative pluralists envision a multitude of distinctive umbrellas each containing a different group, but with the umbrellas’ edges attached to each other, so that, collectively, they embrace everyone. Guided equally by the many handles of the interconnected umbrellas, one can look around to see where another group is coming from within the framework of the whole.

**Roses and Thorns**

Cultivated for almost 5,000 years, roses were known to the Persians, Greeks, and Romans. One of our most popular flowers, the rose now comes in more than 8,000 varieties. Yet as beautiful and romantic as most people find roses to be, their thorns can hurt.

Roses seem a particularly apt analogy in any discussion about multiculturalism. Both require warmth and nurturing to bloom fully. The stronger their roots, the more they thrive. A variety of species is common to both, yet universal treatment gives vibrancy to all. Both also contain beauty and danger. Focusing only on the rose when reaching for it usually brings flesh into painful contact with a thorn; focusing narrowly on racial or cultural differences often causes the pain of isolation or conflict.

Some proponents of multiculturalism (the separatists) want to focus on only one variety of “rose” among many, whereas other advocates (the inclusionists) stress the commonality in origin that so many kinds of “roses” share. The third group of multiculturalists (the integrative pluralists) emphasizes the overall beauty of “roses” of different colors and varieties sharing the same “garden.” The critics of multiculturalism, however, seem only to see its “thorns.”

Completely ignoring the thorns needlessly places one at risk. If we look only at the thorns, we miss the beauty of the rose. If we pay heed to the thorns or remove them, as florists so thoughtfully do for their customers, then they cannot hurt us, and our appreciation for the rose remains unspoiled. We shall now look first at the thorns, the negative side of multiculturalism, and then at the roses, or positive side.

**The “Thorns” of Multiculturalism**

The “thorns” of multiculturalism are primarily those of immigration, language, culture, and race. Other thorns could undoubtedly be named, but these are the most important, for it is primarily in them that some Americans find the threat to U.S. society.
The “Immigrant Thorns”

Make no mistake about it. Continuing high immigration fuels the debate about multiculturalism, for this subject is about much more than simply preserving one’s heritage. It is about power struggles among groups. It is about economics, jobs, social welfare, and tax dollars.

Concern about large numbers of immigrants arriving each year is likely to instill antipathy in many native-born White and Black Americans toward any manifestation of foreign origins through multicultural policies or programs. With more than 24 million immigrants arriving since 1971, a sizable proportion of the American public thinks there are too many immigrants in the country. Such anti-immigration sentiments have been heard in the land almost continually since large numbers of Irish Catholics began entering the United States in the early 19th century.

Public opinion polls conducted by the Roper Center in 1981 and 1982 found that two thirds of all Americans favored a decrease in immigration.\(^{12}\) That heavy anti-immigration response should be understood in the context of the 1980–1982 recession and the influx of more than 200,000 Vietnamese “boat people” and 125,000 Cuban “Marielitos” within this 2-year period.

A 1992 *Business Week* Harris Poll revealed 68% of all respondents saying the present immigration is bad for the country.\(^{13}\) Forty-seven percent of Blacks and 62% of non-Blacks wanted fewer immigrants to come. In the same year, a poll of almost 3,000 Americans of Cuban, Mexican, and Puerto Rican descent, conducted by the Latino National Political Survey, found two thirds agreeing that there were too many immigrants in the United States. Obviously, anti-immigration sentiments are not confined to any one group, as more recent polls have also shown.

One multigenerational pattern about public response to immigration needs mentioning. Contemporary immigrants of any time period have almost always received negative evaluations by most native-born Americans, many themselves descendants of earlier immigrants once castigated by other native-born Americans. With the passage of time, people view these now “old” immigrant groups as making positive contributions to the cultural and socioeconomic well-being of society, as they transfer their negative perceptions to new immigrant groups.

Numerous anti-immigration organizations have emerged to lobby for restrictive laws to curtail immigration. The largest of these are the American Immigration Control Foundation, the Foundation for American Immigration Reform, and the Center for Immigration Studies.

Although these and other anti-immigrant groups vary in the intensity of their views, they all see the present immigration as a threat to the United States.
States. Their opposition rests on their belief that immigrants either take jobs away from Americans, often from poor people who are forced onto welfare, or else go on welfare themselves. Either way, these groups insist, the immigrants drive up social welfare costs. Other arguments include the assertion that immigrants strain law enforcement resources, contribute to an overpopulation problem through their higher birth rates, and deplete our natural resources.

Some states—such as California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Texas, which are the destinations of 80% of all immigrants—clearly feel the impact of immigration more than other states. In early 1994, the New York State Senate Committee on Cities issued a report claiming that legal and illegal immigrants cost that state more than $5 billion a year in welfare, education, and criminal justice services.14 Such reports and claims of high costs for the taxpayer provide ready ammunition for immigration critics.

If multiculturalism means favoring an immigration that places a financial hardship on the American worker and taxpayer, then many Americans oppose multiculturalism.

The “Language Thorns”

Foreigners speaking a language other than English has been a thorn in the side of many Americans for more than 200 years. In 1750, Benjamin Franklin expressed concern about the prevalence of the German language in Pennsylvania, and George Washington wrote to John Adams in 1798 against encouraging immigration because, among other things, the new arrivals “retain the language . . . which they bring with them.”15 No doubt these men spoke not only for themselves but also for a great many of their contemporaries as well.

Such complaints have reverberated down through the generations to the present day. They are now also louder and more numerous, given current migration trends. Two out of every three immigrants speak Spanish, and, as a result, more than 28 million Americans 5 years old and older speak Spanish. Another 7 million speak an Asian or Pacific Island language. Education officials expect more than 5 million children speaking more than 150 languages to enter the nation’s public schools in this decade.

With the prevalence of so many non-English-speaking youngsters and adults, Americans have done more than complain. For example, Japanese-American S. I. Hayakawa, a former U.S. Senator from California and former president of San Francisco State University, founded U.S. English, an organization dedicated to making English the nation’s official language;
eliminating or reducing bilingual education programs; and abolishing bilingual ballots, government documents, and road signs. By 2004, it claimed 1.8 million members. English-only laws were introduced in dozens of state legislatures in the late 1980s. Although 13 states rejected English-only legislative proposals, by 2004, 27 states had passed such legislation.

Many Americans are impatient with those unable to speak English. Their contention is that anyone living in this country should speak its language. Believing that our schools provide the “heat” for the melting pot, they are particularly irked about bilingual education programs. Critics see bilingual programs as counterproductive because they reduce assimilation and cohesiveness in U.S. society, while simultaneously isolating ethnic groups from one another. It is here that opponents use the terms “ethnic tribalism” and “classrooms of Babel” to argue that bilingual education fosters separation instead of cultural unity.16 When LULAC leaders and others call for language and cultural maintenance programs at public expense, the monolingual adherents see red.

If multiculturalism means that English proficiency is not a priority, then many Americans oppose multiculturalism.

The “Cultural Thorns”

About 88,000 new immigrants—about 75% of them Asian or Hispanic—now arrive each month in the United States. Ethnic resiliency in language, ingroup solidarity, and subcultural patterns is both sustained and enhanced by the steadily increasing size of each new immigrant group.

Without this constant infusion of newcomers, acculturation would inexorably lessen each group’s cultural isolation. Group members would gradually learn to speak English and to function more fully within the larger society. Even if such factors as limited education, poor job skills, and discrimination were present to prevent economic mainstreaming, greater cultural fusion would most likely occur over time.

Instead, we have large-scale immigration from Asian and Latin American countries revitalizing ethnic subcommunities with their language usage and cultural patterns. Differences in physical appearance, non-Western traditions and religious faiths—together with the prevalence of languages other than English, especially Spanish—suggest to some Americans that unless immigration is significantly curtailed, American culture and society are in danger of fragmenting.

What makes the cultural thorns even sharper is the new ethnic presence in our suburbs. Once the almost exclusive sanctuary of homogenized Americans, many suburbs are now the residential areas of choice for
tens of thousands of first-generation Americans of non-European, mostly Asian, origin. Educated business and professional persons, seeking out desirable communities with excellent school systems, have brought racial and ethnic diversity to towns unaccustomed to such a multiethnic mix, sometimes erecting a mosque or Sikh temple, with its unique architecture, in contrast to other structures in the community.

It is not simply the presence of visibly distinct newcomers that creates tensions. These first-generation Americans live in the community but they are not of it, for they seldom interact with neighbors. Instead, they maintain an interactional network within their own group scattered throughout the area. This informal social patterning is reminiscent of other immigrants who have lived in recognized territorial subcommunities, but because these middle-class suburban ethnics live among homogenized Americans, their lack of involvement in community life encourages social distance and grates on others’ sensibilities.

Besides a normal first-generation immigrant preference to associate with one’s own people, some pragmatic elements deter suburban ethnic social interactions. Often the wife, filling the traditional gender role as nurturer, has limited command of English and feels insecure about conversing with neighbors. The husband is usually at work for long hours and has little free time, except to spend with the family.

Joining social organizations is a strong American orientation, as noted by Tocqueville and many others. Possessing neither time nor yet fully acculturated, few Asian Americans get involved in such typical suburban activities as parent-teacher organizations, team sports coaching, or scouting leadership. In time, this will probably change, but the present noninvolvement maintains Asian social distance from other Americans in their local communities. In response, suburbanites often view the Asians as not giving to, only taking from, the community. This reaction is especially acute when Asian American children, reflecting the high motivation and goal achievement instilled in them by their parents, appear overrepresented in garnering awards and recognition in scholarships and music.

If multiculturalism means maintenance of an alien culture and lessening community cohesiveness, then most Americans oppose multiculturalism.

The “Racial Thorns”

Except for extremist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, the National Association for the Advancement of White People, and neo-Nazis, few talk
openly of race in their opposition to multiculturalism. Nevertheless, race is an important component of the multiculturalism debate.

The United States may be a less racist country than in earlier years, if civil rights legislation; public opinion polls; and the social indicators of education, occupation, income, and elected officials serve as a barometer. Yet racism still exists, perhaps less intensely in some areas than others, but it remains nonetheless. It can be found in numerous conversations, avoidance responses, subtle acts of discrimination, and myriad interaction patterns.

Institutional racism—the established laws, customs, and practices that systematically reflect and produce racial inequities in society—is a more significant factor than individuals committing overt racist actions, however. Biases remain built into the social structure, causing many individuals unknowingly to act without deliberate intent to hinder the advancement of non-Whites.

Although the Commission on Civil Rights (1981) identified areas where affirmative action could take aim at institutional racism (job seniority rules, nepotism-based recruitment or union membership, bank credit practices, culturally biased job performance tests), some of these remain problem areas. De facto housing segregation and disparities in school funding for urban and suburban schools are other examples of the multigenerational continuation of a subtle, structural racist practice. The pervasiveness of institutional racism remains both an obstacle in the path of upward mobility to many racial minority group members and a basic impediment to better interracial relations.

As successful as the United States has been in assimilating national minorities, it has been far less successful in assimilating racial minorities. African and Native Americans are still not fully integrated as mainstream Americans. Because we have never fully resolved our centuries-old twin problems of race relations and racial integration, the growing presence of people of color from developing world countries exacerbates the matter.

Racial tensions have heightened in some areas because of the influx of racially distinct, “clannish” strangers into neighborhoods unaccustomed to their presence. When this has occurred in previously homogeneous middle-class suburbs, the reactions may be more subtle, but the resentment is real and finds expression in avoidance responses, zoning regulations, and verbal complaints within one’s circle of family, friends, and neighbors.

If multiculturalism means an increased racial presence and/or increased racial power that puts their own racial group to any disadvantage, then most Americans oppose multiculturalism.
Roses bud, bloom, and fade away. Rosebuds give us the promise of new beauty about to arrive, and when the flowers are in full bloom, their contribution of beauty to our lives has to be experienced to be fully appreciated. Gradually, though, the roses fade and their petals gracefully fall to the ground, covering the dark earth with their pastel colors. With modest pruning, the gardener can coax other roses to appear and repeat the process again and again.

Multiculturalism is not a rose that will fade away in the United States, which has always been a land of diversity and destination for millions of immigrants. However, some “blooms” of ethnicity do fade away as, for example, we presently witness what Richard Alba calls “the twilight of ethnicity” among European Americans. Moreover, what appear to some people as thorns may actually be roses instead. Let’s extend our metaphor of roses onto the four types of thorns just discussed.

The “Immigrant Roses”

If a nation’s strength lies in its people, then the strength of the United States clearly lies in the diversity of its people. Immigrants from all over the world have come here, and in one way or another, each group has played some role in the nation’s evolution into its present superpower status.

Past immigrants built our cities, transportation systems, and labor unions, and enabled us to come of age both agriculturally and industrially. Many of today’s immigrants have revitalized our cities; helped our high-tech industries remain competitive; and pumped billions of dollars annually into the national economy through their businesses, occupations, and consumerism. Combating negative stereotyping, societal ostracism, and fear about their growing size, each immigrant group then and now has worked hard to survive and put down roots. Viewed as a threat, each has proven to be an asset.

Although the immigrant roses bloom, others do not often appreciate their beauty. It is the exceptional individual who admires immigrants when they are immigrants. Only after the immigrant rose fades and its falling petals mingle with the soil that contains all our roots do we look back and cherish the bloom that is part of our heritage.

The “Language Roses”

Unlike the people of most nations who are at least bilingual, most Americans are monolingual. This limitation encourages ethnocentrism and
provincialism, and places the business community at a disadvantage in the
global marketplace. Mastery of a second language enhances one’s mental
mobility while enriching cultural insights and perspectives.

If Americans were to become proficient in a second language, encour-
aged to do so by the Asian and Latino population cohorts now living here,
the result could easily be a society reaching greater maturity and tolerance
in its intergroup relations. Most Europeans have long been at least bilin-
gual, and their cultures and societal cohesion have not suffered. Bilingual
advocates argue that bilingualism would not undermine U.S. culture either,
only enrich it.

For those who do not buy into bilingualism for all citizens, the con-
sistent findings of public opinion polls and scientific studies about English
language acquisition offer comforting news. A 2003 Public Agenda study
funded by the Carnegie Foundation revealed that 87% of immigrants
polled said it was extremely important for immigrants to be able to speak
and understand English.15 Echoing similar newspaper polls and studies in
California, Colorado, and elsewhere, a 1996 national poll showed that
80% of Hispanic parents wanted their children to be taught in English, not
Spanish.19 A few years earlier, a study by the RAND Corporation deter-
mined that 98% of Latino parents in Miami felt it was essential for their
children to become competent in English. Such attitudes reach fruition
according to the data, as indicated by Rodolfo de la Garza (1992), who
reported that most U.S.-born Latinos and Asians use English as their pri-
mary language.20 Teachers and other schoolchildren everywhere give
corroborating testimony to this fact.

Despite all fears of Asian and Hispanic immigrants posing a threat
to the English language, assimilation is still, as Nathan Glazer (1993)
asserted, “the most powerful force affecting the ethnic and racial elements
of the United States.”21 As the American Jewish Committee stated, “The
use of additional languages to met the needs of language minorities does
not pose a threat to America’s true common heritage and common bond—
the quest for freedom and opportunity.”22

To allay further the anxieties of those who fear that the large Hispanic
American presence is an unprecedented threat simply because of its size,
we have a comparable example in our past, with the almost 4.9 million
Germans who entered the United States between 1841 and 1900. Keep in
mind that the U.S. population was much smaller then (23.1 million in
1850 and 62.9 million in 1890, compared to 203.3 million in 1970 and
295 million by year’s end in 2004). Also, today’s films, television, music,
and Internet are ever-present English-learning aids that were unknown at
the time of this large German presence.
In the mid- to late 19th century, so many hundreds of thousands of Germans lived in the area lying between Cincinnati, Milwaukee, and St. Louis that it became known as the “great German triangle.”23 Because so many German children attended public schools in the German triangle, the states passed laws permitting all academic subjects to be taught in German, whenever the demand was sufficient to warrant it. Ohio passed its statute in 1837; the others followed in the 1840s.

Consider the enormity of this action! In major cities, as well as in rural regions, the states of Ohio, Missouri, and Wisconsin (other states, too) authorized German as an official language for all classroom instruction! Cultural diversity, including that of language, was not only tolerated, but also encouraged.

The use of German in the public schools served a purpose other than academic instruction. It was intended to preserve the whole range of German culture, even more so after the unification of Germany in the 1870s. With an increased pride in their origins, German immigrants and their children developed a greater sense of their ethnicity than they possessed before their emigration. Because language enhanced their sense of being German, the German Americans continued to speak their language in their schools, homes, churches, and everyday business transactions.

As extensive German immigrant settlement in the region continued decade after decade, German-language instruction in all subjects continued in the public schools. Such was the case in the private schools as well. By 1910, more than 95% of German Catholic parishes had parochial schools taught in German, and more than 2,000 parishes conducted German-language services, much to the consternation of the Irish-American church hierarchy. During World War I, however, patriotic hysteria to drive the “Hun” language out of the schools prompted states such as Ohio and Nebraska to pass laws prohibiting instruction in German in all schools, public and private. A legal challenge to this action reached the U.S. Supreme Court in Robert Meyer v. Nebraska (1923).

Although the Court upheld the states’ right to determine public school instruction in English only, its ruling on private and parochial schools was an important one with regard to language rights. Ruling that all state laws prohibiting the teaching and use of German in private or parochial schools were in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment and therefore unconstitutional, the Court declared that the rights of both parents and private/parochial schools to teach their children in a language other than English was within the liberty guaranteed by that amendment.

Despite (a) the institutionalization of academic instruction in German, (b) the steady influx of large numbers of German immigrants, and (c) more
than 60 years of German language maintenance, German language usage declined. That process had already begun by 1885, as indicated by the complaints then of German American leaders that the younger generation was losing the German tongue and that parents no longer insisted on their children studying German in the schools.

As with other ethnic groups, English gradually replaced the homeland language, even among the millions of Germans so heavily concentrated in regions such as the German triangle. The German language rose once bloomed mightily in the United States, but it has faded, its petals drifting downward and blending with others that fell earlier. Perhaps the Spanish language is another such rose.

The “Cultural Roses”

The United States contains many persistent subcultures, people who steadfastly adhere to their own way of life as much as possible, resisting absorption into the dominant culture. These are usually religious groups—such as the Amish, Hutterites, Mennonites, and Hasidim—or groups whose ancestors predate the United States, such as the Native Americans and Spanish Americans in the Southwest. One could also argue that a persistent subculture exists among one fourth of the Black Americans mired in poverty for multiple generations. Until society finds an effective means to end their deprivation, these hard-core Black poor will continue to subsist within a subculture necessary for their survival.

Most racial and ethnic groups, however, are part of a convergent subculture gradually disappearing as its members become integrated into the dominant culture. For some, their “cultural roses” bloom longer than others, but at some point, the roses do fade. Besides the Germans just discussed, we have dozens of other examples of once-vibrant ethnic subcultures, ones that contemporary native-born Americans considered both persistent and a threat to the dominant culture, that converged into the mainstream.

Ethnic subcultures do not undermine the dominant culture. The United States has always had them, and at the time of their growing strength and vitality, they often contained separatist advocates. It is not uncommon for outsiders to become anxious about subgroup loyalties posing a danger to the larger society. Theodore Roosevelt’s famous remark that “there is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism” spoke to the same fears of subversion of American culture that Schlesinger has addressed as the “disuniting of America.”

When immigrants come to the United States, they come to join us. In forsaking their ancestral lands, they pay us the highest compliment: They
want to spend the rest of their lives with us in a country where they hope to realize their dreams of a better life. They come to be a part of us, an “us” they have imagined our being after exposure to thousands of pictures, films, television shows, stories, letters, and rumors. They come to join us, not to keep separate from us. It may take some time, longer than some Americans’ patience, but for most, that integration into the dominant culture occurs.

The falling petals of fading cultural roses also mingle with the soil containing all our roots. U.S. society, reflecting its multicultural past and present, keeps on being enriched with architecture, art, creative works, cuisine, music, and other cultural contributions from the diversity of its people.

The “Racial Roses”

Here we have a rare species of rose, for its bloom in a multiracial setting in the United States is difficult to produce. Too much of our past and present has been filled with racial animosity, exploitation, and violence. As I said earlier, we have never fully resolved the twin problems of race relations and racial integration in our society.

Part of our problem has been our cultural mind-set. With a simplistic “White” and “non-White” racial classification system, we have insidiously enmeshed race within our social structure. We have created and consistently reinforced an “us” and “them” mentality that manifests itself in social distance, differential treatment, deprivation, and suffering. Furthermore, our monoracial categories ignore the multiracial backgrounds of millions of African Americans, Filipinos, Latinos, Native Americans, and “Whites.” We have taken a step forward in the deconstruction of race with the multiple racial census choices and in the growing recognition of the millions of biracial Americans.

As changing demographics make an increased multiracial society more evident to Americans, perhaps we shall see the removal of the weeds of racism (particularly the rooting out of institutional discrimination) and the blooming of the racial roses. Such a change will not be easy. But as the non-White segment of the U.S. population increases, so may the multiracial component of the American identity. If no longer relegated to the periphery, racial groups will be more at the center, and at the center, one finds both power and integration.

Increased racial tensions remain a distinct possibility, however, and we certainly find examples of that today. However, with the greater sharing
of power that must come, that very same sharing of power could also cause greater racial acceptance.

At the risk of being accused of wearing rose-colored glasses in depicting the racial roses, I would suggest that if we can get the racial roses to bloom in this land—get to that point where each of the races displays its full beauty—then we can look past that point to the next horizon. When the racial rose petals fall and mingle with the soil common to us all, we will have moved past race as a divisive aspect of our society. This was Martin Luther King’s dream, that one day his children would be judged by the content of their character instead of the color of their skin.25

Is Multiculturalism the Enemy?

On the battlefield of multiculturalism, pluralists and assimilationists wage war, but neither side will vanquish the other. As always, both forces will remain an integral part of U.S. society. The United States will remain a beacon of hope to immigrants everywhere, keeping the rich tradition of pluralism alive and well. Assimilationist forces, as consistently demonstrated for centuries, will remain strong, particularly on immigrant children and their descendants. Multiculturalism will no more weaken that process any more than the many past manifestations of ethnic ingroup solidarity have.

Social observers of different eras—Alexis de Tocqueville, Gunnar Myrdal, and Andrew Hacker, among others—have commented on the separate racial worlds within the United States. These separate worlds are not the result of multiculturalist teachings. Only when we break down the remaining racial barriers, eliminate institutional discrimination, and open up paths free of obstacles to a good education and job opportunities for everyone will racial integration improve. Afrocentrist schools do not undermine a cohesive society any more than Catholic schools, yeshivas, or other religious schools do. Multiculturalism is not the enemy; systemic racism is.

Notes


15. Vincent N. Parrillo, Strangers to These Shores, 7th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2003), 142, 158.


19. Parrillo, Strangers to These Shores, 580.


25. King’s famous “I have a dream” speech was delivered on August 28, 1963, during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. His actual words were, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”